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C0717 – May 2, 2007 – Ex 32:20-35 – The Sin Unto Death

Last week we closed with Exod 32:19 where Moses broke the tablets. This signified the breaking of the Mosaic Covenant and demonstrates that the Dispensation of Law or Moses has already begun. Let's pick up in verse 20 with...

d. The Burning of the Golden Calf (32:20)

Exodus 32:20 He took the calf which they had made and burned *it* with fire, and ground it to powder, and scattered it over the surface of the water and made the sons of Israel drink *it*.

As I noted a few weeks ago the **calf** was made of wood overlaid with gold. So, Moses **burned it with fire and ground it to powder**. This would show how insignificant the calf was. It was not god. It could be ground into powder. Its ashes were **scattered over the surface of the water**. The **water** was Israel's drinking supply during their stay at Mt Sinai. Deut 9:21 says a brook descended out of the mountain. Then Moses **made the sons of Israel drink it**. Why did he do this? To test them to see who was guilty and who was not. A similar test is given in Numb 5:11-22 to discover if a man's wife had been unfaithful. If she was suspected of marital unfaithfulness then the priest would take some dust from the tabernacle floor and sprinkle it into an earthenware vessel full of holy water. This was called the "water of bitterness". If she drank the "water of bitterness" and her abdomen swelled and she got sick then she was guilty. If nothing happened then she was innocent. A similar test is taking place here. The Israelites will drink the water and this will manifest who is guilty. Those whom the water shows guilty will be slain by the sons of Levi in verses 27-28.

6. Aaron's Failure to Lead (32:21-24)

Exodus 32:21-24 Then Moses said to Aaron, “What did this people do to you, that you have brought *such* great sin upon them?” ²²Aaron said, “Do not let the anger of my lord burn; you know the people yourself, that they are prone to evil. ²³“For they said to me, ‘Make a god for us who will go before us; for this Moses, the man who brought us up from the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him.’ ²⁴“I said to them, ‘Whoever has any gold, let them tear it off.’ So they gave *it* to me, and I threw it into the fire, and out came this calf.”

While they are drinking the water **Moses** turns to **Aaron** and asks what the people have done to him that he would bring such a **great sin upon them**. Moses holds Aaron responsible as if Aaron instigated the making of the calf. But Aaron responds that it was **the people, they are prone to evil**. Moses knows the nature of the people and that given the least opportunity they will fall into sin. Then, to excuse himself in part, Aaron tells a half-truth. It is true that **they said** to Aaron ‘**Make a god for us who will go before us; for this Moses, the man who brought us up from the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him.**’ (cf Exod 32:1) and it is true that Aaron said ‘**Whoever has any gold, let them tear it off**’ (Exod 32:2) and that **they gave it to** Aaron (Exod 32:3) but it is a lie that Aaron merely **threw it into the fire, and out came this calf.**¹ Exod 32:4 says Aaron himself fashioned it with a graving tool into the molten calf. Aaron tries to remove himself from responsibility.

PRINCIPLE: The leader needs to have an honest and reliable back-up and needs to be training honest and reliable back-up’s. This is a principle of good leadership. Moses was the leader of this people but his back-up, Aaron, was unreliable and untrustworthy. He did not have the kind of character that could stand up against dissension. To a degree he probably spurned Moses’ leadership because he was his younger brother. To be a good church leader the leader must a) be searching for faithful men, b) who are able to teach and c) he must entrust doctrine to them (train them). 2 Tim 2:2 “The things which you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses, entrust these to faithful men who will be able to teach others also.” According to verse 3 a leader should be willing to suffer hardship because of his decisions. Aaron was not. Aaron was more willing to please the people. Had he stood against

them he would have suffered hardship and unpopularity. According to verse 3 a leader is to be a good soldier of Jesus Christ, a *stratiotes*, warrior dedicated to and following the commands of Christ. Aaron failed here as well. He was not able to follow commands. According to verse 4 a leader is not to entangle himself in the everyday affairs of life, the world. He is not to be stained by the world (James 1:27). According to verses 5 a leader is to operate according to the rules. Do things by the book, by the word of God. Aaron failed here too. The bottom line is he didn't have the character, the training or the backbone to be a leader.

In the back of all your mind there should stand a young man, an obedient man, a patient man, a strong man, a courageous man, a man who meditated on Bible doctrine, a man who waited patiently on the side of Mt Sinai for his leader to emerge, a man who did not entangle himself in the everyday affairs of Israel, a man waiting for his next command. That man is Joshua, the apprentice of Moses who will rise to become a great warrior leader of Israel. Aaron was not that kind of man.

7. Moses' Challenge of Obedience (32:25-29)

a. Operation Cleanup (32:25-28)

Exodus 32:25-28 Now when Moses saw that the people were out of control—for Aaron had let them get out of control to be a derision among their enemies—²⁶then Moses stood in the gate of the camp, and said, “Whoever is for the LORD, *come* to me!” And all the sons of Levi gathered together to him. ²⁷He said to them, “Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, ‘Every man *of you* put his sword upon his thigh, and go back and forth from gate to gate in the camp, and kill every man his brother, and every man his friend, and every man his neighbor.’ ” ²⁸So the sons of Levi did as Moses instructed, and about three thousand men of the people fell that day.

Aaron is held culpable for the people getting out of control despite his lie. He was put in leadership by Moses but he did not take the lead when the time came. Due to failed leadership **Aaron let them get out of control** and they became a **derision among their enemies**. The word **derision** means

“whisper”. That is, they gave their **enemies** an opportunity to whisper behind their backs about them and their God, YHWH.

PRINCIPLE: When the people of God get out of control they cast a poor reflection on God and themselves. This gives the media an opportunity to report on the behavior of Christians and God. This is why Christians need strong, faithful, courageous leaders who will not let them get out of control but will proclaim and enforce biblical principles. At stake is not only your reputation but the reputation of God Himself since you are His representative on earth during Christ’s absence.

Therefore, in verse 26 **Moses stood in the gate of the camp and said, “Whoever is for the LORD, come to me!”** That’s leadership. It’s divisive but it’s necessary. **And all the sons of Levi gathered together to him.** Then he spoke solely to the **sons of Levi** and told them to take the sword **and kill every man his brother, and every man his friend, and every man his neighbor.** Why such serious measures? Because they are under Kingdom Law. Remember, on the night of the Exodus everyone who placed blood over the door was passed over and they departed from Egypt. On that night they exited the Kingdom of Satan and entered the Kingdom of God. There was no human king over the Kingdom. God was functioning as the King and Moses was functioning as the dispenser of Kingdom Law. The 3,000 men that were killed were killed because they had violated Kingdom Law. The **sons of Levi** who sided with the King gathered themselves to Moses and obeyed his command. **three thousand men** fell that day. These three thousand must have been the one’s that drank the water and manifested guilt. Although the death of 3,000 is severe it also merciful in light of the fact that God had threatened to destroy over 600,000 in verse 10.

b. The Levi’s Dedication to YHWH (32:29)

Exodus 32:29 Then Moses said, “Dedicate yourselves today to the LORD—for every man has been against his son and against his brother—in order that He may bestow a blessing upon you today.”

Here Moses is still talking to the sons of Levi that sided with YHWH. He commands them to **dedicate** themselves to the Lord. The word **dedicate**

means “fill the hands” and refers to priestly duty. God had wanted to make the whole nation a kingdom of priests beginning with the firstborn sons (Exod 13:1-2; Exod 19:6) but their rebellion made that impossible. Now only the tribe of Levi would become priests. Their self-**dedication** was necessary for God to **bestow a blessing upon** them. In Numb 3:12-13 God did establish the tribe of Levi as His priests. The fact that the sons of Levi killed their own flesh and blood demonstrates they had a greater loyalty to the Lord than their own flesh and blood. They are the parallel to the “true disciples” of the NT (John 8:31-32). By that we do not mean “true believers”. To be a “true believer” is different from being a “true disciple”. One must first be a “true believer” before one can become a “true disciple”. Salvation and discipleship should not be confused. Salvation is a free gift but discipleship is costly.

PRINCIPLE: True discipleship requires that the Lord is our highest loyalty.

Luke 14:26 “If anyone comes to Me, and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life (soul), he cannot be My disciple.

These words are often misunderstood. *First*, they are not the requirement to be justified. Justification is by faith alone and it is a free gift. *Second*, they are a requirement for a believer to become a true or committed disciple. *Third*, a disciple of Christ is “a pupil, a learner” of Christ. *Fourth*, there is no command here to “hate” others. To “hate others” is contrary to the word of God (1 John 2:9, 11; 3:15; 4:20). In Jewish thought “to hate” refers to desiring something less. Matt 10:37 says it clearly, “He who loves father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me; and he who loves son or daughter more than Me is not worthy of Me.” When the Bible uses “hate” it is talking in terms of comparison. We would say “If anyone comes to Me and loves his father, mother wife and children and brothers and sisters and his own life more than Me he cannot be My disciple.” The true disciple must love Him so much that all other loves seem like hatred. The true disciple is willing to suffer family separation and even death over his loyalty to Christ. The act the sons of Levi carried out is almost unthinkable. They killed their own brothers, friends and neighbors. But they remained loyal to God. Therefore, they are the OT parallel of the NT true disciple.

8. Moses Ascends Mt Sinai (32:30-35)

a. Atonement via Confession and Substitution

(32:30-32)

Exodus 32:30-32 On the next day Moses said to the people, “You yourselves have committed a great sin; and now I am going up to the LORD, perhaps I can make atonement for your sin.”

³¹Then Moses returned to the LORD, and said, “Alas, this people has committed a great sin, and they have made a god of gold for themselves. ³²“But now, if You will, forgive their sin—and if not, please blot me out from Your book which You have written!”

The day after the 3,000 were killed **Moses** told the people he was **going up to the Lord** to see if he could **make atonement** for their **sin**. To accomplish this Moses tried two things. *First*, atonement by way of confession of the people’s sin. Verse 31 is the confession “**Alas, this people has committed a great sin, and they have made a god of gold for themselves.**” However, in light of the greatness of the sin Moses is not sure God will forgive this sin by way of confession. He is aware that this sin may be a sin unto death. So, in verse 32a he asks God saying “**But now, if You will, forgive their sin—and if not, please blot me out of your Book which You have written.**” This *second* proposal is his own substitutionary death. Let me die in their place. Some commentators claim that when Moses said **blot me out of Your book** he meant “send me to hell”, something like Paul’s statement in Romans 9:3, which, of course is impossible. No one can lose their salvation for the sake of another person’s salvation even if they desire it. But this does not seem likely in the context. Instead, Moses is saying “end my physical life”. “Let me bear the punishment for their sin.” “Let me be a substitute for them.” “Let me die physically in their place and forgive them on the basis of my sacrifice.”ⁱⁱ However, this is not possible. Even though Moses did not engage in the sin of worshipping the golden calf he had committed other sins. His sacrifice could not satisfy God. But Moses’ does have the heart of the Savior. He loves the people and he is selfless. “Greater love has no man than this, that he lay down his life for his friends.” In the end, God spared Moses but in the future God did not spare His own sinless Son. He loved the world so much that He gave His unique Son to die a substitutionary death for us, the just for the unjust, so that we might become the righteousness of God. He was satisfied by this sacrifice but not Moses.

b. YHWH Pronounces Sin Unto Death (32:33-35)

Exodus 32:33-35 The LORD said to Moses, “Whoever has sinned against Me, I will blot him out of My book. ³⁴“But go now, lead the people where I told you. Behold, My angel shall go before you; nevertheless in the day when I punish, I will punish them for their sin.” ³⁵Then the LORD smote the people, because of what they did with the calf which Aaron had made.

The Lord’s answer in verse 33 is that each person who **has sinned** on this occasion **will be blotted out of His book** (cf Dt 9:14). That is, all who took part in the sin of the golden calf will die for their sin.ⁱⁱⁱ They committed the sin unto death. But, verse 34 intimates that even though judgment for sin unto death was pronounced it would not be immediately executed. **But go now, lead the people where I told you. Behold, My angel shall go before you;** So they will go on toward the Promised Land with the angel of the Lord, the pre-incarnate Christ leading the way. **Nevertheless,** that is, even though you will go on to the land, **in the day when I punish, I will punish them for their sin.** So, the sin unto death has been pronounced but it will not be executed until a future day. In the Bible the sin unto death is sometimes executed immediately (Acts 5:1-10) and other times it is delayed (as here). But once judgment has been pronounced it will eventually be executed. Verse 35 goes on to say **Then the Lord smote the people, because of what they did with the calf which Aaron had made.** What is unclear is whether this happened immediately or not. More probably it happened later. Probably Moses led the people on toward the land just as v 34 says and later God **smote** the people in the wilderness. The final result was that everyone over the age of 20 died before entering the Promised Land with the exception of Joshua and Caleb. They alone were faithful to the Lord (Deut 1:35-39). The way God smote the people during the wilderness wanderings was by plagues (disease) and battle. Over a period of 38 years ~1.5-2 million people died.

The Doctrine of Sin Unto Death.

Let me first say that all death entered the created realm because of Adam’s sin (Rom 5:12). On the day Adam ate he died spiritually. 930 years later he

died physically as a consequence of spiritual death. But all death entered the created realm because of Adam's sin. Here I am only talking about physical death. All men will die physically.

Some people die a Mature Death and others die a Premature Death. Mature death is a death that happens when a person has reached his/her expected lifespan. This can vary depending on genetics, environment, etc... (e.g. people before Noah's Flood lived much longer due to better genetics and better environment; Gen 5). Premature death is a death that happens when a person dies before he/she has reached his expected lifespan.

There are two types of Premature Death. *First*, there is Premature Death due to Effects of the Fall. For example, both believers and unbelievers die young due to disasters (hurricane, volcano, tornado, et. al), physical illness, murder, war, accidents, et al (e.g. Abel Gen 4:8). *Second*, there is Premature Death due to the Sin Unto Death. It can be difficult to distinguish between Premature Death due to Effects of the Fall and Premature Death due to the Sin Unto Death but not normally.

There are two types of Sin Unto Death. *First*, Sin Unto Death due to Compound Carnality. Someone living in compound carnality fails to advance spiritually by confessing or repenting of sin in their lives. This failure can lead to Divine Discipline or the Sin Unto Death. This can happen at any age in a person's life (cf. James 1:14-15; 5:20). *Second*, Sin Unto Death due to Public Carnality (1 John 5:16-17). This kind of Sin Unto Death always has three characteristics.

1. Directly against God
2. Directly in the sight of God's people
3. Directly contrary to a known command

Most accounts of Sin Unto Death recorded in the Bible fit this last pattern (Lev 10:1-3; Numb 3:4; Numb 20:8-12; 1 Chron 10:13-14) and NT (Acts 5:1-10; 1 Cor 11:21, 29-30; 1 John 5:16-17).

TWO OT EXAMPLES

Leviticus 10:1-3 "Now Nadab and Abihu, the sons of Aaron, took their respective firepans, and after putting fire in them, placed incense on it

and offered strange fire before the LORD, which He had not commanded them. ² And fire came out from the presence of the LORD and consumed them, and they died before the LORD. ³ Then Moses said to Aaron, "It is what the LORD spoke, saying, 'By those who come near Me I will be treated as holy, And before all the people I will be honored.'"

This sin had three characteristics. 1) Directly contrary to a known command. Nadab and Abihu knew not to offer strange fire before the Lord (v. 1). 2) Directly against God (v. 3). 3) Directly in the sight of God's people Israel (v. 3). This constitutes a **sin unto death**.

Numbers 20:8-12 ⁸ "Take the rod; and you and your brother Aaron assemble the congregation and speak to the rock before their eyes, that it may yield its water. You shall thus bring forth water for them out of the rock and let the congregation and their beasts drink." ⁹ So Moses took the rod from before the LORD, just as He had commanded him; ¹⁰ and Moses and Aaron gathered the assembly before the rock. And he said to them, "Listen now, you rebels; shall we bring forth water for you out of this rock?" ¹¹ Then Moses lifted up his hand and struck the rock twice with his rod; and water came forth abundantly, and the congregation and their beasts drank. ¹² But the LORD said to Moses and Aaron, "Because you have not believed Me, to treat Me as holy in the sight of the sons of Israel, therefore you shall not bring this assembly into the land which I have given them."

This **sin unto death** also has three characteristics. 1) Directly contrary to a known command. Moses knew he was supposed to speak to the rock not strike it (vv. 8, 11). 2) Directly against God because the stone was a type of Christ (v. 11). 3) Directly in the sight of God's people Israel (v. 12). This constitutes a **sin unto death**. "Later on, when they came to the borders of the land, Moses said to God, in effect, 'Lord, allow me to go on in. Forgive this, and let me go on in.' And the Lord said to him, 'Speak no more to me about this matter,' that is, 'Do not pray about this, but get up to the mountain and I will let you see the land, but that is as far as you can go.'"^{iv} (Dt. 34:1-6) Moses **sin unto death** was not immediate death. This shows that the **sin unto death** is not always immediate but it is always decisive and certain.

TWO NT EXAMPLES

Acts 5:1-10 “But a man named Ananias, with his wife Sapphira, sold a piece of property, ² and kept back some of the price for himself, with his wife's full knowledge, and bringing a portion of it, he laid it at the apostles' feet. ³ But Peter said, "Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and to keep back some of the price of the land? ⁴ "While it remained unsold, did it not remain your own? And after it was sold, was it not under your control? Why is it that you have conceived this deed in your heart? You have not lied to men but to God." ⁵ And as he heard these words, Ananias fell down and breathed his last; and great fear came over all who heard of it. ⁶ The young men got up and covered him up, and after carrying him out, they buried him. ⁷ Now there elapsed an interval of about three hours, and his wife came in, not knowing what had happened. ⁸ And Peter responded to her, "Tell me whether you sold the land for such and such a price?" And she said, "Yes, that was the price." ⁹ Then Peter said to her, "Why is it that you have agreed together to put the Spirit of the Lord to the test? Behold, the feet of those who have buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out as well." ¹⁰ And immediately she fell at his feet and breathed her last, and the young men came in and found her dead, and they carried her out and buried her beside her husband.”

Again, what are the three characteristics of this **sin unto death**. 1) Directly contrary to a known command. It was intentional. Ananias and Sapphira plotted together ahead of time (vv. 4, 9). 2) Directly against God the Spirit (v. 4). 3) Directly in the sight of God's people, Peter and young men in the Church (vv. 3, 6, 8)

1 Corinthians 11:21, 29-30 “for in your eating each one takes his own supper first; and one is hungry and another is drunk...²⁹ For he who eats and drinks, eats and drinks judgment to himself if he does not judge the body rightly. ³⁰ For this reason many among you are weak and sick, and a number sleep.”

Once again this **sin unto death** has three characteristics. 1) Directly contrary to a known command. They knew better, they had instructions from earlier revelation on how to observe the Lord's supper. 2) Directly against

God the Son because the supper symbolizes the Son's death (v. 27). 3) Directly in the sight of God's people, all the Corinthian church (v. 18).

The sin of the golden calf also qualifies. It was 1) "Directly Against God". The people identified God with the golden calf. That's a direct attack on God. 2) It was "Directly in the Sight of God's People". The people committed the sin publicly. They were engaging in idolatry, singing and orgiastic dance among one another. 3) It was "Directly Contrary to a Known Command". The people heard God say "You shall have no other gods before Me" (Exod 20:2-21). They did not sin ignorantly but knowingly and willingly. Therefore, this sin is a **great sin** and qualifies as a "sin unto death".

ⁱ Herodotus said, "The Egyptian belief is that a flash of lightning descends upon the cow from heaven, and this causes her to receive Apis."ⁱ This may be alluded to by Aaron when he said in Exod 32:24 that they threw gold into the fire and out came a calf.

ⁱⁱ In v 10 God had proposed "I will destroy them and make of you a great nation" but Moses proposes the opposite, "destroy me and forgive them".

ⁱⁱⁱ What about Aaron? He was the ring-leader. He clearly committed the sin unto death. What happened to him? According to Dt 9:20 "The LORD was angry enough with Aaron to destroy him; so I [Moses]...prayed for Aaron" This delayed the execution of the sin unto death. Aaron died on Mt Hor almost forty years later at the age of 123 in Numb 33:4.

^{iv} Ray Stedman, Praying Boldly (Sermon on 1 John 5:14-17 can be found on the web at <http://www.pbc.org/dp/stedman/1john/pdf/0167.pdf>)

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